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# Early non-disabling relapses are important predictors of disability accumulation in people with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis

Cyrus Daruwalla , Vahid Shaygannejad , Serkan Ozakbas, Eva Kubala Havrdova, Dana Horakova , Raed Alroughani , Cavit Boz, Francesco Patti , Marco Onofri, Alessandra Lugaresi , Sara Eichau , Marc Girard, Alexandre Prat, Pierre Duquette , Bassem Yamout, Samia J Khoury, Seyed Aidin Sajedi , Recai Turkoglu, Ayse Altintas, Olga Skibina, Katherine Buzzard, Pierre Grammond, Rana Karabudak, Anneke van der Walt , Helmut Butzkueven, Davide Maimone, Jeannette Lechner-Scott , Aysun Soysal, Nevin John, Julie Prevost, Daniele Spitaleri, Cristina Ramo-Tello, Oliver Gerlach, Gerardo Iuliano, Matteo Foschi, Radek Ampapa, Vincent van Pesch, Michael Barnett , Nevin Shalaby, Marie D'hooghe, Jens Kuhle, Maria Jose Sa, Marzena Fabis-Pedrini, Allan Kermode, Saloua Mrabet, Riadh Gouider, Suzanne Hodgkinson, Guy Laureys, Liesbeth Van Hijfte, Richard Macdonell, Celia Oreja-Guevara , Edgardo Cristiano, Pamela McCombe, Jose Luis Sanchez-Menoyo, Bhim Singhal, Yolanda Blanco, Stella Hughes, Justin Garber, Claudio Solaro, Chris McGuigan, Bruce Taylor, Koen de Gans, Mario Habek , Abdullah Al-Asmi, Simu Mihaela, Tamara Castillo Triviño , Talal Al-Harbi, Juan Ignacio Rojas, Orla Gray, Dheeraj Khurana, Bart Van Wijmeersch, Nikolaos Grigoriadis, Jihad Inshasi , Jiwon Oh , Eduardo Aguera-Morales, Yara Fragoso , Fraser Moore, Cameron Shaw, Seyed Mohammad Baghbanian , Neil Shuey, Barbara Willekens, Todd A Hardy , Danny Decoo , Angel Perez sempere, Deborah Field, Ray Wynford-Thomas, Nick G Cunniffe, Izanne Roos , Charles B Malpas, Alasdair J Coles, Tomas Kalincik , and J William L Brown ; On behalf of the MSBase Study Group

## Abstract

**Background:** The prognostic significance of non-disabling relapses in people with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis (RRMS) is unclear.

**Objective:** To determine whether early non-disabling relapses predict disability accumulation in RRMS.

**Methods:** We redefined mild relapses in MSBase as 'non-disabling', and moderate or severe relapses as 'disabling'. We used mixed-effects Cox models to compare 90-day confirmed disability accumulation events in people with exclusively non-disabling relapses within 2 years of RRMS diagnosis to those with no early relapses; and any early disabling relapses. Analyses were stratified by disease-modifying therapy (DMT) efficacy during follow-up.

**Results:** People who experienced non-disabling relapses within 2 years of RRMS diagnosis accumulated more disability than those with no early relapses if they were untreated ( $n=285$  vs  $4717$ ; hazard ratio (HR)=1.29, 95% confidence interval (CI)=1.00–1.68) or given platform DMTs ( $n=1074$  vs  $7262$ ; HR=1.33, 95% CI=1.15–1.54), but not if given high-efficacy DMTs ( $n=572$  vs  $3534$ ; HR=0.90, 95% CI=0.71–1.13) during follow-up. Differences in disability accumulation between those with early non-disabling relapses and those with early disabling relapses were not confirmed statistically.

**Conclusion:** This study suggests that early non-disabling relapses are associated with a higher risk of disability accumulation than no early relapses in RRMS. This risk may be mitigated by high-efficacy DMTs. Therefore, non-disabling relapses should be considered when making treatment decisions.

**Keywords:** Multiple sclerosis, prognosis

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Correspondence to:

**JWL Brown**  
Department of Clinical  
Neurosciences, University of  
Cambridge, Cambridge CB2  
1TN, UK.  
wb255@cam.ac.uk

**Cyrus Daruwalla**  
**Alasdair J Coles**  
**J William L Brown**  
Department of Clinical  
Neurosciences, University of  
Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

**Vahid Shaygannejad**  
Isfahan University of Medical  
Sciences, Isfahan, Iran

**Serkan Ozakbas**  
Dokuz Eylul University,  
Izmir, Turkey

**Eva Kubala Havrdova**  
**Dana Horakova**  
Department of Neurology  
and Center of Clinical  
Neuroscience, First Faculty  
of Medicine, Charles  
University in Prague and  
General University Hospital,  
Prague, Czech Republic

**Raed Alroughani**  
Division of Neurology,  
Department of Medicine,  
Amiri Hospital, Sharq,  
Kuwait

**Cavit Boz**

KTU Medical Faculty Farabi Hospital, Trabzon, Turkey

**Francesco Patti**

Department of Medical and Surgical Sciences and Advanced Technologies, GF Ingrassia, Catania, Italy  
Multiple Sclerosis Center, University of Catania, Catania, Italy

**Marco Onofri**

Department of Neuroscience, Imaging and Clinical Sciences, University G. D'Annunzio, Chieti, Italy

**Alessandra Lugaresi**

Dipartimento di Scienze Biomediche e Neuromotorie, Università di Bologna, Bologna, Italy IRCCS Istituto delle Scienze Neurologiche di Bologna, Bologna, Italy

**Sara Eichau**

Hospital Universitario Virgen Macarena, Sevilla, Spain

**Marc Girard**

**Alexandre Prat**

**Pierre Duquette**  
CHUM and Université de Montréal, Montreal, QC, Canada

**Bassem Yamout**

**Samia J Khoury**

Nehme and Therese Tohme Multiple Sclerosis Center, American University of Beirut Medical Center, Beirut, Lebanon

**Seyed Aidin Sajedi**

Department of Neurology, Neuroscience Research Center, Golestan University of Medical Sciences, Gorgan, Iran

**Recai Turkoglu**

Haydarpasa Numune Training and Research Hospital, Istanbul, Turkey

**Ayşe Altıntaş**

Department of Neurology, School of Medicine and Koc University Research Center for Translational Medicine (KUTTAM), Koc University, Istanbul, Turkey

**Olga Skibina**

Department of Neurology, Box Hill Hospital, Melbourne, VIC, Australia  
Department of Neuroscience, Central Clinical School, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia  
Department of Neurology, The Alfred Hospital, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

**Katherine Buzzard**

Department of Neurology, Box Hill Hospital, Melbourne, VIC, Australia  
Department of Neuroscience, Central Clinical School, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia  
MS Centre, Royal Melbourne Hospital, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

## Introduction

The prognostic significance of non-disabling relapses in people with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis (RRMS) is unclear. However, the European Medicines Agency<sup>1,2</sup> restricts the use of certain disease-modifying therapies (DMTs), particularly natalizumab and fingolimod, to only those with disabling relapses. Whether this is justified remains debated<sup>3</sup> but has important implications: early initiation of high-efficacy DMTs can mitigate future disability,<sup>4,5</sup> so if early non-disabling relapses predict disability accumulation, disregarding them risks preventable long-term disability. We aimed to determine whether non-disabling relapses early in RRMS predict disability accumulation.

## Methods

The MSBase registry was approved by the Melbourne Health Human Research Ethics Committee, and by the local ethics committees in participating centres. Written informed consent was obtained from participants as required.

Longitudinal clinical data from 78,531 patients were extracted from MSBase in May 2022. For inclusion, patients required a diagnosis of clinically-definite RRMS, the MSBase minimal dataset (date of birth, MS centre and dates of MS symptom onset, clinical follow-up, relapses and DMT), a baseline disability score (defined below), and, for the non-disabling relapse group, complete relapse severity information for 2 years from RRMS diagnosis – ‘early MS’.

MSBase classifies relapses as ‘mild’ if they do not affect activities of daily living (ADLs); ‘moderate’ if they affect ADLs; and ‘severe’ if they require hospitalisation. For the purposes of this study, ‘non-disabling’ relapses were those graded as mild by clinicians in MSBase and ‘disabling’ relapses were those graded as moderate or severe, in alignment with treatment guidelines.<sup>6</sup>

We compared people with exclusively non-disabling relapses during the 2-year early MS period to: (a) those with no early relapses; and (b) those with at least one early disabling relapse. These relapse severity groups were each stratified by the highest efficacy DMT received: (i) untreated; (ii) only platform DMTs (interferon-beta, glatiramer acetate, dimethyl-fumarate or teriflunomide);<sup>6</sup> and (iii) high-efficacy DMTs (alemtuzumab, anti-CD20 antibodies, cladribine, daclizumab, haematopoietic stem cell transplantation, mitoxantrone, natalizumab, or sphingosine-1-phosphate

modulators) at any point from RRMS diagnosis to the end of follow-up.

Baseline disability was defined as the first Expanded Disability Status Scale (EDSS) score within the 2-year early MS period when comparing the non-disabling relapse and no relapse group; or the first EDSS score after the early MS period, when comparing with the disabling relapse group, to exclude disability acquired directly from disabling relapses. In case non-disabling relapses also directly caused disability accumulation, a sensitivity analysis was performed comparing the non-disabling relapse and no relapse groups with the baseline as the first EDSS score after the early MS period. Baseline EDSS scores within 60 days after a relapse were excluded. We used mixed-effects Cox models to compare cumulative hazards of a 90-day confirmed disability accumulation event, defined as an increase in EDSS score of  $\geq 1.0$  (or  $\geq 1.5$  if the baseline EDSS=0, or 0.5 if the baseline EDSS  $\geq 5.5$ ), adjusted for age, sex, year of baseline EDSS, interval between the first symptom and RRMS diagnosis, EDSS score at RRMS diagnosis and treatment centre (as a random intercept). When comparing the disabling relapse and non-disabling relapse groups, the models were also adjusted for the number of early MS relapses. The Schoenfeld<sup>7</sup> global test was used to detect violation of the proportional hazards assumption. Statistical analysis was performed using R version 4.1.3.

## Results

The characteristics of the included patients (Supplemental Figure 1) are outlined in Table 1.

People who exclusively experienced non-disabling relapses in the 2-year early MS period accumulated more disability than those with no early relapses if they remained untreated ( $n=285$  vs 4717; hazard ratio [HR]=1.29, 95% confidence interval [CI]=1.00–1.68), or received only platform DMTs ( $n=1074$  vs 7262; HR=1.33, 95% CI=1.15–1.54), but not if they received high-efficacy DMTs ( $n=572$  vs 3534; HR=0.90, 95% CI=0.71–1.13; Figure 1(a)–(c)). These results were similar in a sensitivity analysis with the baseline moved after the early MS period, thus excluding that incomplete recovery from early non-disabling relapses was solely responsible for the observed differences in disability: untreated ( $n=192$  vs 2449; HR=1.23; 95% CI=0.90–1.68); platform DMTs ( $n=925$  vs 6112; HR=1.20, 95% CI=1.03–1.40); high-efficacy DMTs ( $n=595$  vs 3622; HR=0.97, 95% CI=0.78–1.21).

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the studied populations.

Analyses comparing people with no early relapses to those with early non-disabling relapses		Platform DMT		High-efficacy DMT	
Untreated		No relapse	Non-disabling	No relapse	Non-disabling
n	4717	285	1074	3534	572
Female (number, %)	3359 (71.2%)	214 (75.1%)	785 (73.1%)	2479 (70.1%)	418 (73.1%)
Age, years (mean, IQR)	35 (27–43)	31 (26–41)	31 (25–38)	32 (26–40)	29 (23–35)
Baseline EDSS (median, IQR)	1.5 (1.0–2.5)	1.5 (1.0–2.0)	1.5 (1.0–2.0)	2.0 (1.0–3.0)	2.0 (1.0–2.5)
Year of inclusion (median, IQR)	2012 (2007–2016)	2011 (2006–2015)	2011 (2007–2014)	2014 (2011–2017)	2012 (2009–2015)
Duration of MS at inclusion, years (median, IQR)	1.25 (0.31–4.33)	1.00 (0.28–3.68)	0.82 (0.25–2.57)	0.70 (0.23–2.50)	0.62 (0.25–1.77)
Follow-up duration (baseline to last recorded EDSS), years (median, IQR)	1.02 (0.27–4.59)	2.91 (0.85–7.87)	6.20 (3.03–10.40)	4.82 (2.31–8.20)	7.09 (4.33–9.85)
Proportion of follow-up on DMT (median, IQR)	N/A	N/A	84% (63%–95%)	91% (76%–97%)	89% (75%–96%)
Analyses comparing people with early disabling relapses to those with early non-disabling relapses		Platform DMT		High-efficacy DMT	
Untreated		Disabling	Non-disabling	Disabling	Non-disabling
n	333	192	925	1631	595
Female (number, %)	251 (75.4%)	151 (78.6%)	675 (73.0%)	1165 (71.4%)	432 (72.6%)
Age, years (mean, IQR)	36 (28–45)	34 (27–43)	34 (27–41)	32 (26–39)	32 (26–39)
Baseline EDSS (median, IQR)	2.0 (1.0–3.5)	1.5 (1.0–2.0)	1.5 (1.0–2.0)	2.0 (1.0–3.0)	1.5 (1.0–2.0)
Year of inclusion (median, IQR)	2012 (2006–2016)	2012 (2007–2016)	2012 (2008–2016)	2014 (2011–2017)	2014 (2011–2017)
Duration of MS at inclusion, years (median, IQR)	2.82 (2.19–5.20)	2.93 (2.25–5.38)	2.90 (2.24–5.07)	2.54 (2.16–3.99)	2.57 (2.16–3.78)
Follow-up duration (baseline to last recorded EDSS), years (median, IQR)	3.75 (1.16–8.38)	3.45 (1.00–8.84)	6.05 (2.28–10.6)	5.00 (2.42–8.26)	5.40 (2.91–7.93)
Proportion of follow-up on DMT (median, IQR)	N/A	N/A	100% (96%–100%)	99% (90%–100%)	99% (89%–100%)
Number of early relapses (median, IQR)	4 (3–6)	3 (2–5)	4 (3–6)	4 (3–6)	3 (2–5)

DMT = disease-modifying therapy; EDSS = Expanded Disability Status Scale; IQR = interquartile range; N/A = not applicable; RRMS = relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis. 'Early' relapses are those in the first 2 years after RRMS diagnosis.

- Pierre Grammond**  
CISSS Chaudière-Appalache, Levis, QC, Canada
- Rana Karabudak**  
Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey
- Anneke van der Walt**  
Department of Neuroscience, Central Clinical School, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia  
Department of Neurology, The Alfred Hospital, Melbourne, VIC, Australia
- Helmut Butzkueven**  
Department of Neuroscience, Central Clinical School, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia
- Davide Maimone**  
Centro Sclerosi Multipla, UOC Neurologia, ARNAS Garibaldi, Catania, Italy
- Jeannette Lechner-Scott**  
School of Medicine and Public Health, University Newcastle, Newcastle, NSW, Australia  
Department of Neurology, John Hunter Hospital, Hunter New England Health, Newcastle, NSW, Australia
- Aysun Soysal**  
Bakirkoy Education and Research Hospital for Psychiatric and Neurological Diseases, Istanbul, Turkey
- Nevin John**  
Monash Medical Centre, Melbourne, VIC, Australia  
Department of Medicine, School of Clinical Sciences, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia
- Julie Prevost**  
CSSS Saint-Jérôme, Saint-Jerome, QC, Canada
- Daniele Spitaleri**  
Azienda Ospedaliera di Rilievo Nazionale San Giuseppe Moscati Avellino, Avellino, Italy
- Cristina Ramo-Tello**  
Hospital Germans Trias i Pujol, Badalona, Spain
- Oliver Gerlach**  
Academic MS Center Zuyderland, Department of Neurology, Zuyderland Medical Center, Sittard-Geleen, The Netherlands  
School for Mental Health and Neuroscience, Maastricht University, Maastricht, The Netherlands

**Gerardo Iuliano**

Ospedali Riuniti di Salerno, Salerno, Italy

**Matteo Foschi**

Department of Neuroscience, Neurology Unit, S. Maria delle Croci Hospital of Ravenna, AUSL Romagna, Ravenna, Italy

**Radek Ampapa**

Nemocnice Jihlava, Jihlava, Czech Republic

**Vincent van Pesch**

Cliniques Universitaires Saint-Luc, Brussels, Belgium  
 Université Catholique de Louvain, Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

**Michael Barnett**

Brain and Mind Centre, Sydney, NSW, Australia

**Nevin Shalaby**

Neurology, Kasr Al Ainy MS Research Unit (KAMSU), Cairo, Egypt

**Marie D'hooghe**

Department of Neurology, National MS Center, Melsbroek, Belgium

**Jens Kuhle**

Neurology, MS Center and Research Center for Clinical Neuroimmunology and Neuroscience Basel (RC2NB), Departments of Head, Spine and Neuromedicine, Biomedicine and Clinical Research, University Hospital Basel, University of Basel, Basel, Switzerland

**Maria Jose Sa**

Department of Neurology, Centro Hospitalar Universitario de Sao Joao, Porto, Portugal  
 Faculty of Health Sciences, University Fernando Pessoa, Porto, Portugal

**Marzena Fabis-Pedrini**

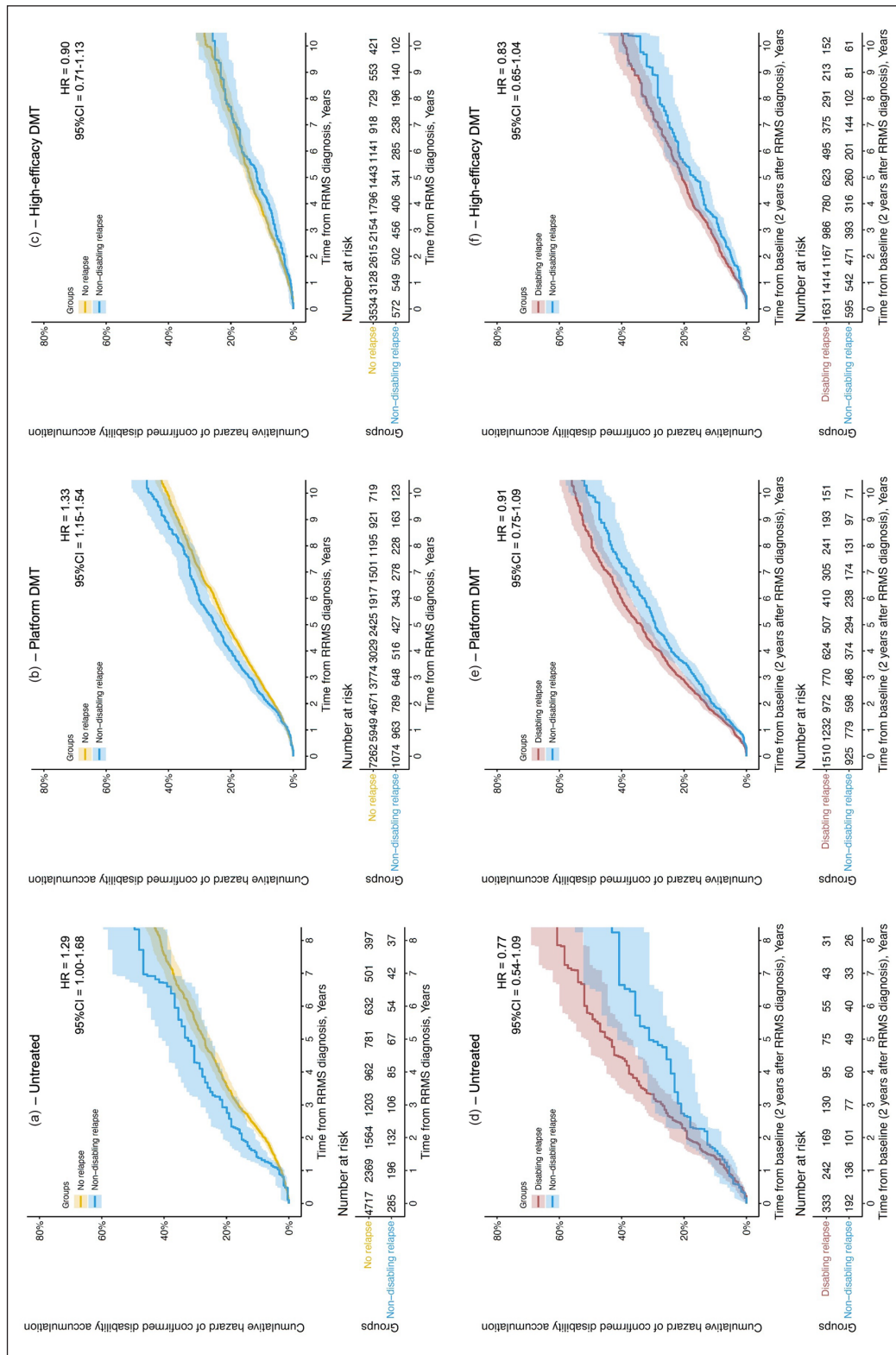
Perron Institute for Neurological and Translational Science, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, WA, Australia  
 Centre for Molecular Medicine and Innovative Therapeutics, Murdoch University, Perth, WA, Australia

**Allan Kermod**

Perron Institute for Neurological and Translational Science, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, WA, Australia  
 Institute of Immunology and Infectious Diseases, Murdoch University, Perth, WA, Australia  
 Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, Nedlands, WA, Australia

**Saloua Mrabet**

Department of Neurology, University Hospital Razi – Manouba, Tunis, Tunisia  
 Faculty of Medicine of Tunis,



**Figure 1.** Comparison of the cumulative hazard of a 90-day confirmed disability accumulation event between people with exclusively non-disabling relapses and no relapses (a–c), or exclusively non-disabling relapses and at least one disabling relapse (d–f), in the 2 years after RRMS diagnosis, in people who remained untreated throughout follow-up (a and d), were given only platform DMTs (b and e) or were given high-efficacy DMTs (c and f) at any point during follow-up. DMT = disease-modifying therapy; HR = hazard ratio; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval; RRMS = relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis.

Differences in disability accumulation between people who exclusively experienced non-disabling relapses in the early MS period and those who experienced any disabling relapses in early MS did not reach statistical significance (Figure 1(d)–(f)): untreated ( $n=192$  vs  $333$ ; HR=0.77; 95% CI=0.54–1.09); platform DMTs ( $n=925$  vs  $1510$ ; HR=0.91, 95% CI=0.75–1.09); high-efficacy DMTs ( $n=595$  vs  $1631$ ; HR=0.83, 95% CI=0.65–1.04).

## Discussion

In this international observational study, people with RRMS who experienced early non-disabling relapses had a higher risk of disability accumulation than those with no early relapses, if they were untreated or received only platform DMTs during follow-up. However, this association was not observed in people who received high-efficacy DMTs. This suggests, contrary to current guidance,<sup>1,2</sup> that non-disabling relapses should be considered in decisions to initiate or escalate treatment, including with high-efficacy therapies.

We did not confirm statistically whether distinguishing early relapse severity has prognostic significance, but the power of these analyses was limited by smaller numbers. There was a non-significant trend towards more disability accumulation with early disabling relapses over early non-disabling relapses, which was mitigated with DMTs. This might be explained by previous observations that relapse phenotypes tend to recur,<sup>8</sup> and incomplete recovery from the first relapse, which is more common for disabling relapses, predicts incomplete recovery from subsequent relapses.<sup>9</sup>

## Limitations

Relapse severity was non-standardised. However, the three-category classification is defined by the MSBase Study Protocol and reflects current DMT-prescribing restrictions<sup>6</sup> as applied in real-world clinical practice. By including treatment centre in our models, we mitigated variation among centres in relapse severity classification. Data were missing on the severity of a large proportion of early relapses, which may have limited both our power to detect differences between disabling relapses and non-disabling relapses and the generalisability of our conclusions. We also did not perform a direct comparison between matched groups of patients treated with different DMT efficacies following a non-disabling relapse. In view of these limitations, further studies are required to confirm the futility of making treatment decisions based on relapse severity.

The follow-up duration in the untreated populations was short (median 1.02–3.75 years). However, a similar risk of disability was observed in patients with non-disabling relapses treated with platform DMTs over a longer follow-up (median 4.44–6.20 years).

On-treatment relapses may be associated with worse outcomes than off-treatment relapses,<sup>10</sup> but we did not explore this here. We also did not explore the prognostic value of radiological disease activity.

## Conclusion

This study suggests that people with early non-disabling relapses have a higher risk of disability accumulation than those with no early relapses and that this risk might be mitigated by high-efficacy DMTs. Therefore, even non-disabling relapses should be considered when making treatment decisions.

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## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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University of Tunis El Manar, Tunis, Tunisia

**Riadh Gouider**  
Department of Neurology, University Hospital Razi – Manouba, Tunis, Tunisia

**Suzanne Hodgkinson**  
Immune Tolerance Laboratory, Ingham Institute and Department of Medicine, University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney, NSW, Australia

**Guy Laureys**  
**Liesbeth Van Hijfte**  
Department of Neurology, University Hospital Ghent, Ghent, Belgium

**Richard Macdonell**  
Austin Health, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

**Celia Oreja-Guevara**  
Department of Neurology, Hospital Clinico San Carlos, Madrid, Spain

**Edgardo Cristiano**  
Centro de Esclerosis Múltiple de Buenos Aires (CEMBA), Buenos Aires, Argentina

**Pamela McCombe**  
The University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD, Australia Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital, Herston, QLD, Australia

**Jose Luis Sanchez-Menoyo**  
Hospital de Galdakao-Usansolo, Galdakao, Spain

**Bhim Singhal**  
Bombay Hospital Institute of Medical Sciences, Mumbai, India

**Yolanda Blanco**  
Center of Neuroimmunology, Service of Neurology, Hospital Clinic de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

**Stella Hughes**  
Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast, UK

**Justin Garber**  
Westmead Hospital, Sydney, NSW, Australia

**Claudio Solaro**  
Department of Neurology, ASL3 Genovese, Genova, Italy Department of Rehabilitation, M.L. Novarese Hospital, Moncrivello, Italy

**Chris McGuigan**  
St. Vincent's University Hospital, Dublin, Ireland

**Bruce Taylor**

Royal Hobart Hospital,  
Hobart, TAS, Australia

**Koen de Gans**

Groene Hart Ziekenhuis,  
Gouda, The Netherlands

**Mario Habek**

Department of Neurology,  
University Hospital Center  
Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia  
University of Zagreb, School  
of Medicine, Zagreb, Croatia

**Abdullah Al-Asmi**

College of Medicine &  
Health Sciences and Sultan  
Qaboos University Hospital,  
Sultan Qaboos University,  
Seeb, Oman

**Simu Mihaela**

Department of Neurology,  
Victor Babes University of  
Medicine and Pharmacy,  
Timișoara, Romania

**Tamara Castillo Triviño**

Hospital Universitario  
Donostia and IIS  
Biodonostia, San Sebastián,  
Spain

**Talal Al-Harbi**

Neurology Department, King  
Fahad Specialist Hospital-  
Dammam, Khobar, Saudi  
Arabia

**Juan Ignacio Rojas**

Hospital Universitario de  
CEMIC, Buenos Aires,  
Argentina

**Orla Gray**

South Eastern HSC Trust,  
Belfast, UK

**Dheeraj Khurana**

Postgraduate Institute of  
Medical Education and  
Research (PGIMER),  
Chandigarh, India

**Bart Van Wijmeersch**

University MS Centre,  
Hasselt-Pelt, Belgium  
Noorderhart Rehabilitation &  
MS Center, Pelt and Hasselt  
University, Hasselt, Belgium

**Nikolaos Grigoriadis**

AHEPA University Hospital,  
Thessaloniki, Greece

**Jihad Inshasi**

Rashid Hospital, Dubai,  
United Arab Emirates

**Jiwon Oh**

St. Michael's Hospital,  
Toronto, ON, Canada

**Eduardo Aguera-Morales**

University Hospital Reina  
Sofia, Cordoba, Spain

**Yara Frago**

Universidade  
Metropolitana de Santos,  
Santos, Brazil

**Fraser Moore**

Jewish General Hospital,  
Montreal, QC, Canada

**Cameron Shaw**

Geelong Hospital, Geelong,  
VIC, Australia

**Seyed Mohammad**

**Baghbanian**  
Booali Sina Hospital,  
Neurology Department,

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F.P. received speaker honoraria and advisory board fees from Almirall, Bayer, Biogen, Celgene, Merck, Novartis, Roche, Sanofi-Genzyme and TEVA. He received research funding from Biogen, Merck, FISM (Fondazione Italiana Sclerosi Multipla), Reload Onlus Association and University of Catania.

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K.B. received honoraria and consulting fees from Biogen, Teva, Novartis, Genzyme-Sanofi, Roche, Merck, CSL and Grifols.

P.G. has served in advisory boards for Novartis, EMD Serono, Roche, Biogen Idec, Sanofi Genzyme, Pendopharm and has received grant support from Genzyme and Roche, has received research grants for his institution from Biogen Idec, Sanofi Genzyme, EMD Serono.

A.v.d.W. served on advisory boards and receives unrestricted research grants from Novartis, Biogen, Merck and Roche She has received speaker's honoraria and travel support from Novartis, Roche, and

Merck. She receives grant support from the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia and MS Research Australia.

H.B. received institutional (Monash University) funding from Biogen, F. Hoffmann-La Roche Ltd, Merck, Alexion, CSL, and Novartis; has carried out contracted research for Novartis, Merck, F. Hoffmann-La Roche Ltd and Biogen; has taken part in speakers' bureaus for Biogen, Genzyme, UCB, Novartis, F. Hoffmann-La Roche Ltd and Merck; has received personal compensation from Oxford Health Policy Forum for the Brain Health Steering Committee.

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J.L.-S. received travel compensation from Novartis, Biogen, Roche and Merck. Her institution receives the honoraria for talks and advisory board commitment as well as research grants from Biogen, Merck, Roche, TEVA and Novartis.

N.J. is a local principal investigator on commercial studies funded by Novartis, Biogen, Amicus and Sanofi

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M.B. served on scientific advisory boards for Biogen, Novartis and Genzyme and has received conference travel support from Biogen and Novartis. He serves on steering committees for trials conducted by Novartis. His institution has received research support from Biogen, Merck and Novartis.

M.D. received consultancy and advisory board fees from Roche, Sanofi-Genzyme, Biogen, Merck-Serono,

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C.O.-G. received honoraria as consultant on scientific advisory boards from Biogen, Celgene, Merck, Novartis, Roche, Sanofi-Genzyme and TEVA.

E.C. received honoraria as consultant on scientific advisory boards by Biogen, Bayer-Schering, Merck, Genzyme and Novartis; has participated in clinical trials/other research projects by Merck, Roche and Novartis.

P.M. received speakers fees and travel grants from Novartis, Biogen, T'évalua, Sanofi and Bayer Schering and received honoraria and consulting fees from Novartis, Bayer Schering and Sanofi.

J.L.S.-M. accepted travel compensation from Novartis, Merck and Biogen, speaking honoraria from Biogen, Novartis, Sanofi, Merck, Almirall, Bayer and Teva and has participated in clinical trials by Biogen, Merck and Roche

B.S. received consultancy honoraria and compensation for travel from Biogen and Merck.

S.H. has received unrestricted educational grants or speaking honoraria from Biogen, Merck Serono, Novartis, Roche and Sanofi Genzyme.

Y.B. received speaker honoraria from Merck, Biogen, Bristol, Novartis and Sanofi

C.S. served on scientific advisory boards for Merck, Genzyme, Almirall, and Biogen; received honoraria and travel grants from Sanofi Aventis, Novartis, Biogen, Merck, Genzyme and Teva.

B.T. received funding for travel and speaker honoraria from Bayer Schering Pharma, CSL Australia, Biogen and Novartis, and has served on advisory boards for Biogen, Novartis, Roche and CSL Australia.

M.H. participated as a clinical investigator and/or received consultation and/or speaker fees from Biogen, Sanofi Genzyme, Merck, Bayer, Novartis, Pliva/Teva, Roche, Alvogen, Actelion, Alexion Pharmaceuticals and TG Pharmaceuticals

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Faculty of Medicine, Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences, Sari, Iran

**Neil Shuey**  
St. Vincent's Hospital, Fitzroy, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

**Barbara Willekens**  
Department of Neurology, Antwerp University Hospital, Edegem, Belgium  
Translational Neurosciences Research Group, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium

**Todd A Hardy**  
Concord Repatriation General Hospital, Sydney, NSW, Australia

**Danny Decoo**  
AZ Alma Ziekenhuis, Damme, Belgium

**Angel Perez sempere**  
Hospital General Universitario de Alicante, Alicante, Spain

**Deborah Field**  
Lyell McEwin Hospital, Elizabeth Vale, SA, Australia

**Ray Wynford-Thomas**  
Division of Psychological Medicine and Clinical Neurosciences, Cardiff University School of Medicine, Cardiff, UK  
Helen Durham Centre for Neuroinflammation, University Hospital of Wales, Cardiff, UK

**Nick G Cunniffe**  
Department of Clinical Neurosciences, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

**Izanne Roos**  
**Tomas Kalincik**  
MS Centre, Department of Neurology, Royal Melbourne Hospital, Melbourne, VIC, Australia  
CORE, Department of Medicine, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

**Charles B Malpas**  
MS Centre, Department of Neurology, Royal Melbourne Hospital, Melbourne, VIC, Australia  
CORE, Department of Medicine, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC, Australia  
Melbourne School of Psychological Sciences, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC, Australia



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### ORCID iDs

Cyrus Daruwalla  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2329-5329>


Vahid Shaygannejad  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5511-509X>


Dana Horakova  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1915-0036>

Raed Alroughani  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5436-5804>

Francesco Patti  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6923-0846>

Alessandra Lugaesi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2902-5589>


Sara Eichau  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9159-3128>

Pierre Duquette  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7231-1754>


Seyed Aidin Sajedi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6704-9787>

Anneke van der Walt  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4278-7003>

Jeannette Lechner-Scott  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3850-447X>

Michael Barnett  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2156-8864>


Celia Oreja-Guevara  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9221-5716>


Mario Habek  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3360-1748>

TamaraCastilloTriviño  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9249-3185>

Jihad Inshasi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5892-751X>

Jiwon Oh  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5519-6088>

Yara Fragoso  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8726-089X>

Seyed Mohammad Baghbanian  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8138-7504>

Todd A Hardy  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4145-3172>  
 Danny Decoo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7689-3114>  
 Izanne Roos  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0371-3666>  
 Tomas Kalincik  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3778-1376>  
 J William L Brown  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7737-5834>

### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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